Sermon: Evening Worship
Associated Church Press Convention
May 1, 2012
Rev. John Buchanan

One of the occupational hazards for every preacher is unexpected interruption. At the church one block from here where I delivered a sermon most Sundays for the past 26 years until I retired three months ago, the regular, weekly interruptions came in the form of ambulance sirens. Before air conditioning, when windows are open on warm Sundays - invariably it seemed - just as I was wading into the most important part of the sermon, an ambulance would fly by on Michigan Avenue. It happens all day, every day. It is the way ambulances approach the emergency room at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, down Michigan Avenue, siren wailing, right past the open front doors of Fourth Presbyterian Church. I learned, over the years, how to deal with it. You could hear it coming in the distance, coming down Lake Shore Drive, and with a little nimble creativity could slow down, stall, insert a little unimportant filler, until the noise was past and the people could hear again.

Of course, a baby crying is the most common interruption, always at the most inopportune moment, a tiny, (sometimes not so tiny), wail or screech piercing the silence of the sanctuary. It takes nerves of steel not to get knocked off balance and out of rhythm, not to mention losing your train of thought and becoming hopelessly lost, when you are competing with a hungry, insistent six-month old who thinks it's time for lunch, not for a long winded sermon. My predecessor, an eloquent orator of the old school, I was told, simply stopped preaching when an infant cried, and glared in the general direction of the interruption until the crying stopped, or the embarrassed parents gathered up the child and headed for the nearest exit.

When it happened, I tried, not always successfully, to remember something Frederick Buechner once said: “There should be interruptions in sermons...the sound of a baby crying, a toilet being flushed - something to remind us of just what the flesh is the Word became."

It's in a sermon on the remarkable prologue to the Fourth Gospel, a sermon which is one of the best I've ever read. Buechner called it "Air for Two Voices" and describes the first voice: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The voice "chanting, a cantor's voice, a muezzin's voice, a poet's voice, a choir boy's voice before it has changed - ghostly, virginal, remote, and cool as stone."

The second voice, Buechner said is "insistent, over earnest, a little nasal, above all a down-to-earth voice".. "There was a man whose name was John"

"In principio erat verbum" - the cry soars up to the rose window."

And the second voice, "That's true enough, but to come back to the Baptist for a moment."

It's good to have two voices, the second interrupting the first, reminding, grounding, enfleshing.

"When the host is being raised before the altar, to the tinkling of bells,", Buechner wrote, "it is meet and right if not his bounden duty for the sexton to walk through with the vacuum cleaner."

A homily prepared for church publishers, writers, journalists, people whose daily occupation is with words ought, it seemed to me, have something to do with the central biblical affirmation we know as the “Theology of the Word"; that God has something to say; that it is the very essence of God to communicate, to be in conversation with creation, with human beings, and that God is infinitely creative in coming up with ways to be in conversation; that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, - as a matter of fact, the Word was God."

Writing about the recent dust up between two journalists in the New York Times about the late Christopher Hitchens, author of God is not Great, Tom Long observed how "fragile and difficult" it is to have a conversation about religion these days. I suppose it always has been but it seems to me to be particularly challenging today to write anything about religion publicly without being co-opted for purposes not your own, exploited, or simply dismissed.

And yet, what we do is incredibly important., and certainly consistent with the central biblical assertion that God is in the communication business.

How important? Any student of history knows that the first thing dictators and tyrants do, without exception, is to try to control who gets to tell the story and how. It is no accident that even before they get the clergy, dictators go after the journalists, the writers.

No human community survives in health and peace without truth telling, without free inquiry, without unfettered communication and conversation. And, just as important, words become means of grace, bearers of truth and beauty. It was a revelation to me in a college American Literature course to discover the power of words, narrative, stories, to convey beauty and grace, in the same way I had begun to discover music can and does. I can remember it clearly - Professor Stoneseifer lecturing on The Grapes of Wrath and suggesting that Steinbeck's powerful image of a young mother, offering an older man, dying of thirst, her breast, was reminiscent of one of the most

meaningful religious symbols of all. It brought an unaccountable tear to my eye at the age of 20, and still does.

Writing is art - anyone who tries to do it knows that. It is also craft, requiring discipline and practice. It can be, and often is, I propose, also a means of grace.

Hemingway was not only a gifted artist but also a very disciplined craftsman, determined, obsessed really to write with clarity and simplicity and purity. He wrote and rewrote and rewrote again, changing words, word order, erasing, never satisfied.

Reynolds Price said that Hemingway aspired to sainthood and I think what he meant was Hemingway's utter devotion to his vocation, his art and craft as a means of grace.

Marilynne Robinson in a reflection in our magazine on the resurrection narratives in the Fourth Gospel, observes that "a writer reads a story differently than other people do, noticing techniques and workmanship…the mystery of it."

John, Robinson says, ”is a masterful storyteller...with nuance and subtlety he lets the reader in on the skepticism of the characters,”… and then, this…"It is clear from the metaphysics of the prologue that John's Christ might have appeared to his followers as an effulgence of holy light… instead, (he comes) as any man tending a fire at the shore, sharing a meal with stingers."

John, Robinson concludes, with these images of true humanity, establishes the full, shattering meaning of incarnation, over against persistent tendencies to spiritualize it, and, I would add with more eloquence and power and meaning than a library of incarnational theology..

Robinson, Hemingway, Buechner, writers, writing with disciplined commitment become means of grace to me..words, written clearly, lovingly, convey beauty and truth..

And I presume to suggest that that is what we are about, you and I, in this business…That the God whose Word is there from the beginning, whose word became flesh in Jesus, that God conveys truth and beauty and grace through people like you - who put your craft, your art, your disciplined devotion to God's essential being and purpose of communicating.

In that sense Buechner came up with a memorable image of God which I have come to love, and commend to you…

"God is a poet, searching for the right word. Tries Noah, but Noah is a drinking man. Tries Abraham…Moses…David…Elisha…John the

Baptist…Word after word God tries and then finally tries once more to say it right, to get it all into one final Word what He is and what human is and why the suffering of love is precious..And the Word that God finds -who could have guessed it?- is this one, Jesus of Nazareth, all of it coming alive at last in this life, Jesus the implausible Jew, the Word made finally flesh in Jesus' flesh."

In the beginning was the word and the Word was with God and the Word was God…and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

All praise to him.